

Polis In Paris: how news changes as news institutions change

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/06/19/polis-in-paris-how-news-changes-as-news-institutions-change/

2009-6-19

I was lucky enough to spend today with some outstanding journalism educators from around the world at a conference at [Sciences Po in Paris](#). This is the full text of a talk I gave. I edited down in delivery because most of these people know much more about this stuff than me and I didn't want to bore them. So here's the full text for you!

I am a traditional hack who spent 20 years at places like the BBC and ITN's Channel 4 News – over two decades I watched my trade modernise to the point where we had a bigger, better global media than ever before – I care passionately about what journalism can do for society – economically, politically, socially, culturally it is a vital part of human discourse and activity – and in an information age of digital data abundance we need the functions of filtering, editing, reporting more than ever.

Three ago I left the newsroom to set up Polis the journalism institute at the London School of Economics – in those three years our world has been turned upside down. I made it clear in my book SuperMedia that journalism as we know it could be lost – I also suggest that in many ways, that might not be a bad thing.

In SuperMedia I set out my understanding of Networked Journalism – a more open, public participatory, more distributed form of journalism production. It is happening all around us and the pace of the acceleration towards more networked journalism is increasing.

At the heart of these changes is what is happening to the carriers of meaning, the structures of practice, the spaces that allow journalism to happen. These institutions were great machines for creating commercial value and at defining journalism's cultural role. They were very definable institutions – newspapers, broadcasters, companies, corporations – they had brands, logos, employees, shareholders, charters, rules, style-guides – they are rivalrous, competitive, discrete, proprietorial edifices – they are towers of steel and glass with offices and desks – they are fortresses.

It is easy to mock these fortresses, but they also protected good journalism – they sheltered brave and risky journalists – they nurtured unpopular but necessary journalism – they gave legal protection and resources. So anything that replaces the fortresses has to do a better job, not simply tear down the walls.

As society becomes more networked, as communications becomes more disintermediated, then many of these fortresses are being abandoned and are left as lonely ruins in uninhabited wastes, like crusaders castles in the Levant. Others are shoring up their walls, digging their trenches deeper, and herding their remaining populations behind ever-thicker walls. You see how this metaphor can run and run?

But actually most media fortresses are opening up. They have lowered the draw-bridge. They have invited the local peasantry inside and some of the brave editorial knights are learning about life outside of the castle. Take the BBC.

It is flooded with User Generated Content: 60 000 photos in two days when it snowed in London. It has a radio news programme where the listeners decide on the content. It runs election road shows in Bangladesh with phone-ins live from villages. It has offered – or rather been forced – to share its facilities with rival broadcasters to help support diversity in regional news. This is all quite radical for a lumbering beareaucracy like the BBC governed as it is by a charter and strict editorial guidelines.

Peter Horrocks, the BBC's former head of newsroom, now head of BBC world service describes that shift in thinking from the journalist's perspective. He says that it means moving from a culture which is identified by the news unit you are in towards a culture based on audience understanding. So the journalist should not think of the world as being identified by the programme you work on or the network you provide for.

Now I want to suggest that what is happening here is far more significant than simply organisational change. The fortresses are being networked to death, but many of the fortresses, as Peter indicates there – are in our minds.

First let us understand that journalism is more than a 4th estate or a component of the public sphere – media is a much more wholistic fact of modern life as my former colleague and the late head of my department, Roger Silverstone wrote in *Media and Morality* – and this is an extraordinary claim – he said:

“I want to endorse the idea of the media as an environment, an environment which provides at the most fundamental level the resources we all need for the conduct of everyday life. It follows that such an environment may be or may become, or may not be or may not become, polluted.”
(Professor Roger Silverstone, Media and Morality Sage 2006).

I am convinced that Silverstone was right to describe news media in that way and to ask such a fundamental moral

question. This is not just about finding a new business model. We are at a moment of profound change for the news media that raises transformational questions about the ethics, politics and economics of journalism.

And journalism itself is a key to answering broader societal and global questions.

If we don't save its core values and functions then we will struggle to deal with the complex problems facing the world such as climate change, economic crisis and migration.

So journalism is changing: it is now permeable, interactive, 24/7, multi-platform, disaggregated and converged.

The technological changes are impressive. Take these examples.

- The Twitter alerts of tourists who witnessed the Sichuan earthquake that scooped the world's media and unsettled the Chinese government.
- The mobile phone images of Saddam Hussein's grisly execution that punctured American hopes to present the world with the story of a clean judicial death.
- The Guardian newspaper – a small circulation liberal British newspaper that now has 17 million readers online outside the UK.

You will have countless examples yourselves, I am sure. We can all see what is happening in Iran.

What I want to do is to say is that journalism must continue to change **more** profoundly in its editorial ethos and its social role if it is to survive and thrive in this digital future.

We can use new media technologies to transform our journalism. It means building public participation into all aspects of journalism. It means encouraging user generated content, promoting interactivity and sharing the news space. It means accepting that the old business model is broken and that we have to justify the value of journalism again.

It means shifting from being a manufacturing industry to a service industry.

It means changing what we do from creating product to facilitating a process.

It is much more than simply taking the existing newsroom online.

The good news is that people want this. This is why they write blogs, edit films for YouTube and construct social networks online. They want to take part in a conversation about their world and the way that they live their lives. Journalism's task is to facilitate that conversation.

People want the diversity of the blogosphere – but they also want the editing, filtering and packaging functions that journalism performs. They want the reporting, investigation, analysis and information that journalism can facilitate whether produced professionally or unpaid.

I can think of no other business where the consumer is prepared to create content for free and yet where the producers complain about that.

So why is our business failing? Journalism has never been more needed and more in demand and yet journalists are struggling to sustain business models that will deliver this product.

I think it is partly because there is still too much duplication. Journalists create too much material that is available more easily elsewhere. We create too much formulaic, boring and irrelevant content.

There is too much journalism that does not add value and is not relevant. It is being exposed and it will disappear. That's going to be painful.

Too many organisations have gone on line and chased the easy traffic. Some of them will succeed but not everyone can cover showbusiness, celebrity and sport.

Too little has been invested in real networked journalism. The old media owners have been too keen to protect their profit margins instead of investing in connecting with new communities and providing the citizen with a product that is of real value to them.

There has been some outstanding innovation and hard work in the face of the challenge of media change – but

collectively there has been a failure of imagination and a reluctance to understand the full extent of what is happening.

As journalists or journalism educators we have to help our students understand that transforming the way we do journalism also means recasting our values as journalists – economic, editorial and political.

We have to end Fortress Journalism. We have to break down the walls of news institutions and make new partnerships with the citizen.

This is partly by engaging the citizen in every aspect of journalistic production. That way you will produce something that people can trust, use and support.

We can also do it through through partnerships with NGOs, with business, with government, with community groups or with foundations or with universities or schools or with other independent media.

Social groups, business and government are all becoming more networked – all organisations are turning into media organisations in some way – journalism can be part of that process. It means taking journalism out of the newsroom and into offices, schools, hospitals and homes.

Journalism has to go environmental, in Silverstone's phrase. Or to take another philosopher of new media, it must become part of the culture. In his forthcoming book, *Communication Power* (OUP, 2009) Manuel Castells outlines how society is remaking itself as a series of networks:

“Networked individualism is a culture, not an organizational form. A culture that starts with the values and projects of the individual but builds a system of exchange with other individuals, thus reconstructing society rather than reproducing society.”

This will challenge the traditional role of journalism as a separate Fourth Estate but I think this has always been something of a myth. Journalists have savoured the power that separation brings, but we never really accepted the responsibilities that it entailed.

Journalism has to make a new contract with the citizen. In the past the deal was that journalism was allowed to do some good and much poor work in return for advertising or tax subsidy.

Now it has to make a make the case for journalism as an agent of public value and a part of people's lives in an age where people have shown that they want media to act on their behalf, not that of media shareholders or professional cliques. In return they will support what we do.

Being Networked means much more than just public participation in what you do as a journalist. Now the journalist will have to go to where the citizen is.

So just when we thought we had got used to Web 2.0 here comes the next leap forwards, although it is about the uses of existing rather than new technology. It is social networking. Facebook is not a website – it is a platform. Media and communications in general is moving into social networks – journalism has to go there too.

We have no choice as journalists. We either Network or die.

Now as journalism educators we must explain and understand these profound facts. We must attend to these shifting definitions. Our own frameworks for understanding how media works and its effects must be reconfigured. We are being set new research questions.

We must understand how Temporality is changing. With the death of the deadline comes multi-dimensional narratives.

With the death of distance comes new flows of information. The world is interconnected, and that connectivity reverses the direction of ideas as well as data.

And with public participation comes a redistribution of knowledge and creativity. Media literacy must be part of every curriculum but the autodidactic also thrives in a networked world where empowerment itself is suddenly disintermediated.

This is an unusual and important historic moment. It doesn't matter if you come from a country with, for example, low internet penetration or from a city without broadband. The point is that everywhere will be effected at some point – in different ways – but profoundly.

As my colleague Terhi Rantanen has summarised in her recent book, *When News Was New* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) we can see how the very idea of news itself is shifting again.

This has happened before – look at how the mass media was created by news agencies and then the growth of broadcasting in the 20th century.

And it is not just about new technologies – many of the new media trends build on wider social developments such as increasing levels of education, the spread of liberal market economics and the growth of consumerist individualism.

But the shift to networked journalism is a shift in power as well as a shift in practice.

We are going to lose more than just traditional news organisations. We are going to lose more than just traditional news practices. We are going to gain a whole new way of making news. We are in the process of reinventing the idea of what news is itself. That weird formulaic culture that was 20th century mass media western journalism may be at an end. And as an end, it is also a beginning. This is Rantanen's fascinating conclusion which I will now use to make mine:

“Considering the historical trajectory of news from news hawkers in the Middle Ages to bloggers in the Information Age, it is possible to argue that we are now witnessing the death of ‘modern news’, as conceived in the nineteenth century. In this situation of multiple change, serious thought is required about what constitutes news. Everybody thinks they know what news is, but in fact nobody can define the twenty-first century concept of news. The boundaries are again becoming blurred. News may again become just new stories”
(Rantanen 2009)

As journalists and journalism educators we are at a remarkable moment where we can think from the bottom up – morally as well as entrepreneurially – about what journalism is and how we make it – the fortresses are being networked to death, let us go forth in search of new adventures and new stories.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science